

Setting up a Befriending Scheme

Befriending: Existing schemes have proved that “being a friend” to someone who would otherwise be socially isolated and marginalised due to mental health challenges can give them the confidence and sense of self-worth to recover control of their life in creative and fulfilling ways.

Equality: Race, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief or disability should be no bar to volunteering as a befriender. In particular, users of mental health services can make excellent volunteers, so should be encouraged to apply.

Funding: Schemes entirely managed by volunteers are extremely cost-efficient in relation to the social benefits they generate and may therefore attract funding from Local Authorities, Health Trusts and other grant-making bodies. Being Alongside has a Small Grant Scheme which may help – please see our website for details.

Referrals: Most schemes receive referrals from mental health professionals, Social Services, social prescribers or GP surgeries. Close relationships with such agencies is the ideal as risk management can be more difficult with self-referrals. Those with a history of violence or drug/alcohol misuse would not usually be accepted.

Insurance: Public Liability Insurance is essential and likely to be the greatest cost for a befriending scheme.

Education: Good training for all volunteers is essential. Please see our factsheet on Befriender Training Courses for further information.

Need for sensitive matching of befriender and “befriended”: Ideally this should be carried out by those running the training, who will know the aptitudes of each volunteer. Befriender application forms should be matched with the forms of those referred, considering respective ages, interests, geographical locations and any specific needs. Same gender befriender-befriended relationships tend to work best.

Defined by a time boundary: Some schemes limit befriending relationships to 6 -12 months. Others are open-ended. Continuity of care in mental health services is often compromised by staff turnover. A befriender can offer consistency and reliability. Expectations in this regard, and in the frequency and duration of meetings should be addressed at the initial meeting, and reviewed as necessary.

Endings: These should be properly structured – if possible with plenty of advance notice and preparation, to manage disappointment. As not all matchings will be successful, support may also be necessary to end a relationship that is not working.

Relationships: Although befriending can become friendship, its basis in a formal contractual relationship makes this somewhat artificial. One party is likely to be more vulnerable. There needs to be a specific expectation of confidentiality and its limits.

Support: Befrienders must be well supported by regular mandatory support groups or one-to-one supervision/mentoring. Contact should be maintained with either the original befriender, the ongoing care worker, or, where someone has been discharged from specialist care, with their GP in case a befriender should relapse in any way.

Considerations when setting up a Befriending Scheme

Establish the Need - Find out what else is happening in your area. Look for similar projects locally to link up with. Search online or visit www.befriending.co.uk.

Form a Steering Group - This offers an informal starting point, gauges interest and determines whether the project will be viable. If possible, talk to people active in similar schemes. Being Alongside may be able to offer contacts, or provide seed funding at this stage.

Form a Committee – Aim to appoint a Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Befriending Coordinator and ideally at least 3 others, including at least one mental health service user and one mental health practitioner. Agree a name and logo; draft and approve a Constitution with clear aims and objectives; draw up a budget/business plan and research funding options.

Appoint a Befriending Coordinator – This key person acts as the link between volunteer befrienders and those referred for befriending. It requires considerable time and patience, and good written and oral communication skills, but is a highly rewarding role.

Recruit and Train Befrienders – A free training course is the best means of recruitment, directing enquirers to the Befriending Coordinator for details of what the role entails. The course trainer should have professional experience in the mental health field. The course should be informal and friendly, encouraging interaction and feedback from trainees. A training course is the ideal way to assess suitability of participants, but selection should also involve a full application form, a DBS check and references.

Recruit Befriendees - Once your organisation is known and trusted by the local NHS mental health trust, Social Services and other referring agencies, referrals of prospective befriendees will follow. Personal visits to such agencies may be necessary initially, which is why having a mental health professional on the Committee is paramount.

Introductions – The Befriending Coordinator and course trainer should ideally work together on matching befrienders and befriendees from referral forms and befriender application forms.

Support - Ongoing support must be offered to volunteers in the form of regular supervision groups and/or personal mentoring by suitably qualified volunteers (retired health professionals, retired social workers, or highly experienced befrienders).

A more detailed step-by-step description of this process (although not specifically targeted to mental health befriending) has been produced by the Good Neighbours Network in conjunction with the Portsmouth Diocesan Council for Social Responsibility:

<https://www.goodneighbours.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/befriending-guide-web.pdf>

Disclaimer: Information provided on this factsheet is given in good faith based on the experience of Being Alongside and is not legally binding

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